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Source: *Arctic Anthropology*, 1988, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1988), pp. 12-29

Published by: University of Wisconsin Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40316165>

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THE SOLAR CULT AND THE TREE OF LIFE

ANATOLI I. MARTYNOV

Abstract. The major historical phases of North Asia from Neolithic to Medieval times are characterized by distinctive genres and styles of art. Only in the Far East can a continuing line of development be traced. Nevertheless, evidence exists of a shared, evolving world view marked iconographically by disks and radiations, on one hand, and by bushy branching of trees, horns, and antlers, on the other. These symbols are believed to show veneration of the sun and of the "tree of life," respectively. They appear to have deep local roots. Nevertheless, they may have been influenced, probably via the Indo-Europeans long dominating the Eurasian steppes, by ancient Near Eastern ideologies.

INTRODUCTION¹

A great many works of ancient art from Northern Asia have been discovered through archaeological investigations. The most ancient works of art are of Paleolithic age, coming from the Mal'ta camp site and other sites of the Mal'ta Paleolithic culture. The latest come from the culture of nomadic herdsmen who occupied the steppes of South Siberia. In the north, they come from the medieval culture of forest hunters. Many subjects and

patterns of this ancient art blend into the ethnography of the recent native population of Siberia and the Far East.

Today, knowledge of hundreds of petroglyphs, thousands of ancient representations of animals inscribed on cliff faces, a large number of metal objects in the so-called "animal style," many stone sculptures with complex symbols, and other evidence make it clear that we are dealing with a distinctive and rather ancient cultural hearth in Northern Asia that is rich in works and content. Excluding the distinctive Paleolithic art, we can define the following periods of artistic development.

(1) The Neolithic art of Northern Asia, predominantly 5000-3000 B.C., is represented everywhere by petroglyphic and sculptural depictions of fauna: moose, bears, aquatic birds, etc. It is the art of hunters and fishermen.

(2) The art of early herdsmen and agriculturalists in Northern Asia, about 2500-1800 B.C., is represented by Afanasyevo figurines, sculptures of the early Okunevo culture, depictions on cliffs, and Bronze Age plant ornaments and solar disks.

(3) Art of the Scytho-Siberian world, 700-300 B.C., is the brilliant, highly sophisticated art of the so-called "animal style," with its complex semantic content.

(4) The art of the North Asian Middle Ages, or the Old Turkic period (Tashtyk-

¹This essay is underlain by Marxist culture-historical theory as modified over the past 30 years by Soviet empirical research. In general, the fundamental model (Bober 1927) has been retained. It includes the hypotheses of the psychic unity of mankind, a common human propensity toward economic improvement through technological and social innovation, the domination of social structure and ideology by "the mode of production," and the critical role in sociocultural evolution of particular transitions. The most important include the change from foraging to food-producing economies. In today's researches, the fundamental model is modified by ecological considerations, which may, for example, limit development to a foraging stage, and by consideration of the impacts of ethnic group interaction (Masson and Merpert 1966). (DBS)

Türki-Kyrgyz, A.D. 200-1000),² traces its origin from the Hunno-Sarmatian epoch near the beginnings of our era and its first half-millennium. It is represented by three zonal divisions: the art of the herdsmen of the South Siberian steppes, the art of the forested north, and the art of the Far East.

In each of the epochs noted by us, an internal development of basic forms and style took place. Therefore, the ancient art of North Asia must not be represented as a unitary whole nor as a continuum of growth.³ Such a continuum may be identified only for particular regions within this extensive zone. For example, in the Far East, it is possible to note a single developmental sequence in ornamental art from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages. Such a tendency may also be noted in certain cases for North Asian petroglyphs.

In the current essay, we examine materials on ancient art only as a research device for investigating the world view of the ancient populations of Northern Asia. It is essential to note that ancient art has generally been studied from the perspective of art history, as a body of artistic creations of a specific technical style, and with chronology and cultural affiliations to be determined. At the same time, it is quite evident that we are dealing, not with artistic creations in the contemporary sense but—in most cases—with distinctive artistic symbols which possess, above all, a conceptual and semantic content and which fulfill functions of religion and world view. In pursuit of this plan, we shall try to investigate the basic groups of North Asian art work and clarify what religious and world view aspects of the life of ancient populations they symbolize.

IMAGES OF THE SUN, SACRED ANIMALS, AND THE TREE OF LIFE ON NORTH ASIAN PETROGLYPHS

In all of North Asia, the cults of the sun and of sacred animals were formed and persisted among Neolithic hunters. They had local origins and peculiarities. These images were denoted in Neolithic and later period

²Old Turkic is the language of the Runic epigraphs of Mongolia and the Ili River basin, approximately A.D. 550-1000. It can also be used for a sequence of archaeological and historic cultures, Tashtyk and Kyrgyz in the Altay, and Türki and Uygur throughout Inner Asia. These begin with the fall of the Hunnic dominance, clearly prior to the first epigraphic monuments. See Deny et al. (1959), Kiselev (1951), and Shimkin (1967). (DBS)

petroglyphs through frequently encountered concentric circles which, in symbol systems throughout the world, signify the sun. In Siberia, they are encountered separately and in connection with representations of Siberian taiga animals (Fig. 1).

Styles and manners of representation changed, and mythological concepts developed, but the basis remained as before: representations of the "solar goat" (or ibex), uniting the image of the sun with the common animals of North Asia which were basic objects of the hunt in the Neolithic and later periods as well. Representations of the "solar moose" with concentric circles on the haunches are known among the Sakachi Alyan drawings along the Lower Amur River (Okladnikov 1971: Plates 72, 75). Several representatives of deer with radiant antlers are known from Altay petroglyphs. Their chronology cannot be accurately determined. They may relate to the Neolithic or to a later period (Okladnikov et al. 1980: Plates 8, 28, 35, 79).

A truly unique representation of a "sun-deer" is known from the Tomsk engravings, a petrographic site situated between Kemerovo and Tomsk on the shore of the Tom River (Okladnikov and Martynov 1972:92; Martynov 1982: Fig. 12). The central part of the rock is occupied by a reindeer, incised in outline, flying through the heavens. It has a small, schematically indicated body, short legs, and winglets shown in outline. The entire image creates the impression that the deer is flying. The animal has an unusually large head, from which radiant spokes emerge.

In the history of Northern Asia, hunting and herding always had primary significance. The influences of these traditional economies transformed basic ideas common to mankind. Specifically, a cult of animal fertility equivalent to the cult of the "tree of life" was widespread in the ancient art of Northern Asia. In fact, it was this very idea of the "tree of life" in its animal embodiment, with the same meaning: the regeneration of life and recycling in nature. Under Siberian conditions, where hunting and herding had primary importance, the symbol of the "tree of life," of regeneration, was often not a tree but the antler or horn of a deer, ram, or goat [i.e., ibex].

There are numerous representations of animals with horn-trees on the petroglyphs of the Altay, Yenisey, and Altay-Sayan

³A concise descriptive and analytical history of North Asiatic art is the forthcoming volume: A. I. Martynov: *The Ancient Art of Northern Asia*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana. (DBS)



Figure 1. Symbols of the Solar Cult on North Asian Petroglyphs.

regions (Okladnikov et al. 1980, 1981, 1982). Here, the goat and the ram are the most widely distributed images. These depictions do not always accurately represent a concrete animal; they variously portray mountain sheep, goitered gazelles (*Gazella subgutterosa*), and Siberian ibex (*Capra sibirica*). The differences are barely evident. In this group of representations, we find a conventional, schematic portrayal of the body and a relatively hypertrophied horn-tree which are characteristic and carry the basic semantic message. The horns are formed variously, in the form of straight or bent branches, arches with branches, lightly bound spirals, or fir trees with many wavy or bushy branches. Such variability in the representation of animal horns is not accidental.

The image of the goat in antiquity was an important mythological figure, complexly associated with fertility and natural cycles. It has been repeatedly noted that goat figures are often accompanied by solar representations in the form of a circle or spot. Probably two peculiarities of horns--their capacity for growth and their external resemblance to wood--attracted attention. Specifically for this reason, wood and horns were visualized analogously by hunters and herdsmen as embodiments of one and the same idea. Metaphorically, this idea is transmitted rather convincingly. The horns of the animals represented on petroglyphs are disproportionately large. They are entire trees with branches, which barely resemble true horns. Their dimensions, as a rule, considerably exceed the body of the animal itself.

In this connection, we note three basic stylistic groups of representations (Fig. 2). One is a series of simple drawings characteristic of the high-altitude plateau of the Gornyy Altay. The animals have very small, schematic, profile depictions of their bodies and one or two long, straight, and parallel rod-like horns with frequent short branches. Such horns are absent in nature. These are tree trunks with branches coming out from them.

The second group is comprised of similarly schematic animals but with more complex drawings of horns. These horns are bushy, with their branches resembling bushes more than horns.

The third group is comprised of very ugly animal representations with completely schematic bodies, ugly heads, and short or often absent legs. These animals appear to be dead (fallen) rather than live individuals. All attention in these depictions is focused upon the horns.

PILLARS OF FERTILITY OF EARLY SIBERIAN AGRICULTURALISTS AND HERDERS

Unique stone statues with complex symbolization belong to an early North Asian archaeological culture with a food-producing economy, the Okunevo of the third and second millennia B.C. Archaeologists have dealt repeatedly with these works (Vadetskaya et al. 1980). However, the semantic puzzles associated with these complex images remain undeciphered. Only isolated researchers have indicated the religious nature of the statues and their ties to solar symbolics (Gryaznov 1950:128-156). In recent years, related Eneolithic⁴ representations on cliffs, executed in ocher, have been discovered. They portray bulls, human masks, and stylized anthropomorphic beings.

Attempts have been made to explain the Okunevo stone stelae as anthropomorphic figures with details such as facial features, ears, and horns. The complex configurations above the heads have been explained as crowns. Those in the center of the stone pillars were viewed as clothing ornaments or aprons (Vadetskaya et al. 1980:42-46, Fig. 1-3). Even greater doubt arises in the examination of mandatory accessories which were, evidently, carriers of iconographic meaning. These were the so-called "eyes," usually three, stripes on the face, and the headgear. Yet it is most difficult to accept these as concrete features applicable to human images. They are highly variable, and can be only remotely associated with eyes, headgear, ribbons, or horns.

Such interpretations of these statues' details and of their semantic content are the result of approaching them from a position of contemporary logic, and from stressing their anthropomorphic nature and their superficial, approximate likeness to human figures. Naturally, the more correct interpretation of these figures as a group and in detail is a rather complicated task. Extended reasoning and searching for superficial analogies drawn from contemporary thinking are not required, but rather the clear observance of a series of general, concrete assumptions and approaches to research.

Many years ago, it was correctly thought that the South Siberian stelae, in contrast

⁴In Soviet usage, the Eneolithic refers to a culture-historical stage marked by food production (agriculture and/or herding) and the use or even mining and fabricating of copper. It corresponds to Chalcolithic as used by Near Eastern archaeologists (Aharoni 1982:35-48). (DBS)

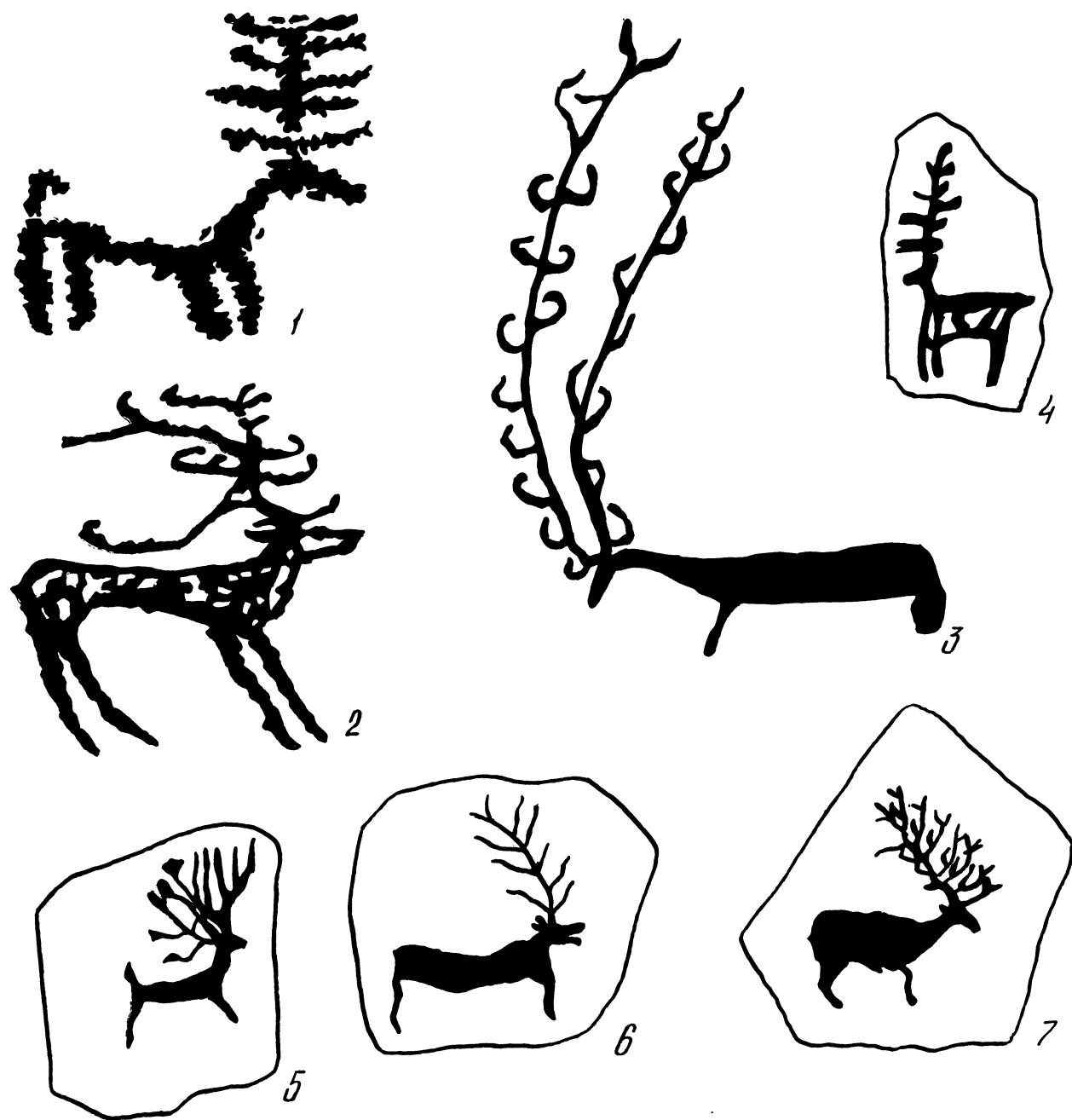


Figure 2. Symbols of the Vegetative Cult on North Asian Petroglyphs.

to those of the Black Sea, were almost never human representations. Rather, they depicted the images of mythological beings with mixed human and animal traits: those of solar and fertility deities (Formozov 1969: 210).

Before interpreting specific details and the general rendering of the Okunevo stelae, it is essential to indicate the critical new traits of the entire Eneolithic epoch which gave rise to this complex art. The dissemination of

herding and agriculture into the Eurasian steppes led to a critical new relationship between man and the soil, the forces of nature, the secret regeneration of life, the roles of the sun and rain, and the understanding of the earth's fertility. It is clear that economic changes, the revolution in the means of production, led to a basically new ideology that was characteristic of early agriculturalists and herders.

B. A. Rybakov has noted that two series of ceremonies arose in this period. One was connected with the fertility-bearing power of grain, the fertility of the soil, and the protection of crops. The other consisted of rites directed toward the sky, the change of seasons, and the cycles of life (Rybakov 1965:24-47). With this period are connected the philosophical-mythological concepts of the "great mother," bestowing life to every living thing, both floral and faunal, and the concept of the "tree of life."

In the Eneolithic, there was thus the formation and dissemination of a more progressive and complex ideology for understanding the world. With this arose new myths and new cults meeting the needs of herders and agriculturalists. The Eneolithic was thus not only an economic revolution but a revolution of world view and art. The latter became an art of symbols and ornaments with deep mythological content. With the development of concepts and cults of "earth mothers" who give birth and bestow moisture came rain symbols and agricultural-magical representations on ceramics (Rybakov 1981:156-212). This new art and ideology was, unquestionably, that of the Okunevo culture in North Asia.

Among the Okunevo stelae are those which appear to be images of a solar deity. They are expressed as masks with outgoing radiations (Figs. 3-7). However, all the stelae carry solar symbolism. Several symbolic varieties are known: circles closed within a square, circles with radiating branches, and circles with four outgoing triangular rays. One sign is usually represented on the front of the stelae, while several are represented on the sides and the back. It is also important to note that solar signs are present on all the statues. They are a most characteristic and perhaps mandatory feature of these figures. The circles on the masks, the so-called "eyes," are also solar signs.

The "headdresses" or "crowns" rising above the masks deserve special attention. On many figures they have complex configurations of branches rising upward. These are composed of straight or wavy lines widening toward the base and of drop-shaped figures which resemble horns or eyes at first glance. Some figures are provided with even more complex representations, consisting of a long wavy band emanating from the head or a geometric assembly of figures and interior masks. These figures are furnished with thin, branched shoots on the sides. This configuration, as has been noted, is commonly viewed as a "crown" or "headdress" by some investigators. This is hardly the case. As has already been pointed out, there is no necessity to accept these stelae as human figures, either in their configurations or in

their accessories. Few are anthropomorphic, even in their most general traits (Fig. 4).

Unquestionably, these figures represent a complex graphic transmission of important attributes of an entirely different significance--a vegetative cult. The following facts support this interpretation. The shoots that are accepted as horns, ears, or headgear resemble these only by location. They are in threes, fives, and sevens. They are quite varied in form and many are dissimilar to ears either in their location on the head or in their form. Among these images of shoots are three groups of representations which correspond to three stages of plant growth (Fig. 3).

The first stage is germinating grain. This has the form, in cross section, of three to five stages of plant development. They show two critically important details, the plant core (cotyledon), the source of vegetative awakening, and the sprout, the beginning of new life (Fig. 3:1). The second stage is represented by shoots breaking through the earth's crust. They are varied: straight, close, and thin, like shoots of wheat and barley, or thick, bent, and branched, like beans, or else thin, twisting, and long, like millet. Some are thick and bifurcated at the ends, like buckwheat or oats (Fig. 3:2). On certain stone pillars the third stage of vegetative development is shown: bushy shoots rising upward with branches (Fig. 3:3). For example, a whole bush grows from a head on a stela discovered in the Tazmin hamlet of Khakasia (Fig. 4:c).

Here, completely clearly, one of the basic ideas of the epoch of food-producing economies is shown. The "tree of life" and its connection with an image could be a metaphor for the earth itself or for grain, as basic sources of reproduction. And at the side of this stela, along its whole length, are five solar signs, which represent the basic lifegiving power of awakening growth. Among the plants, bean shoots and bushy grain shoots may be identified.

On a series of stelae, vegetation is shown symbolically as a wavy line or as straight, thick lines growing out of a drop-shaped mark (grain), or as a rectangular mark with a circle and dot in the middle (Fig. 4:1-4). As a group, these symbols are more complex in symbol and meaning. Their interpretation is twofold. Either they are vegetative symbols, schematic representations of the "tree of life" growing directly from the head of the "ancestral mother," or they are symbols of falling heavenly moisture as ideograms of water.

The same exclusively vegetal character is carried, in our view, by the representation

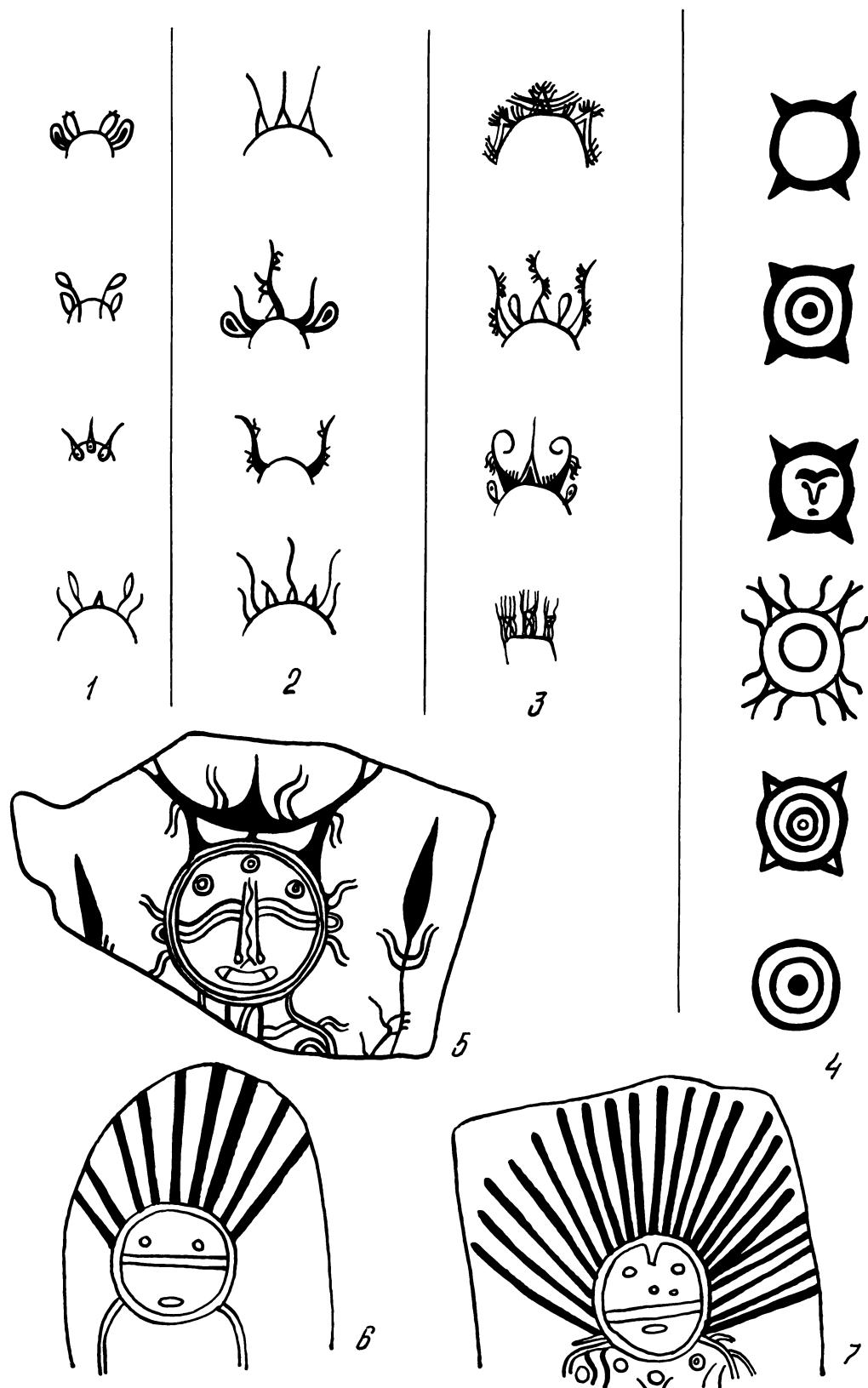


Figure 3. Solar Deities from Okunevo Stelae.

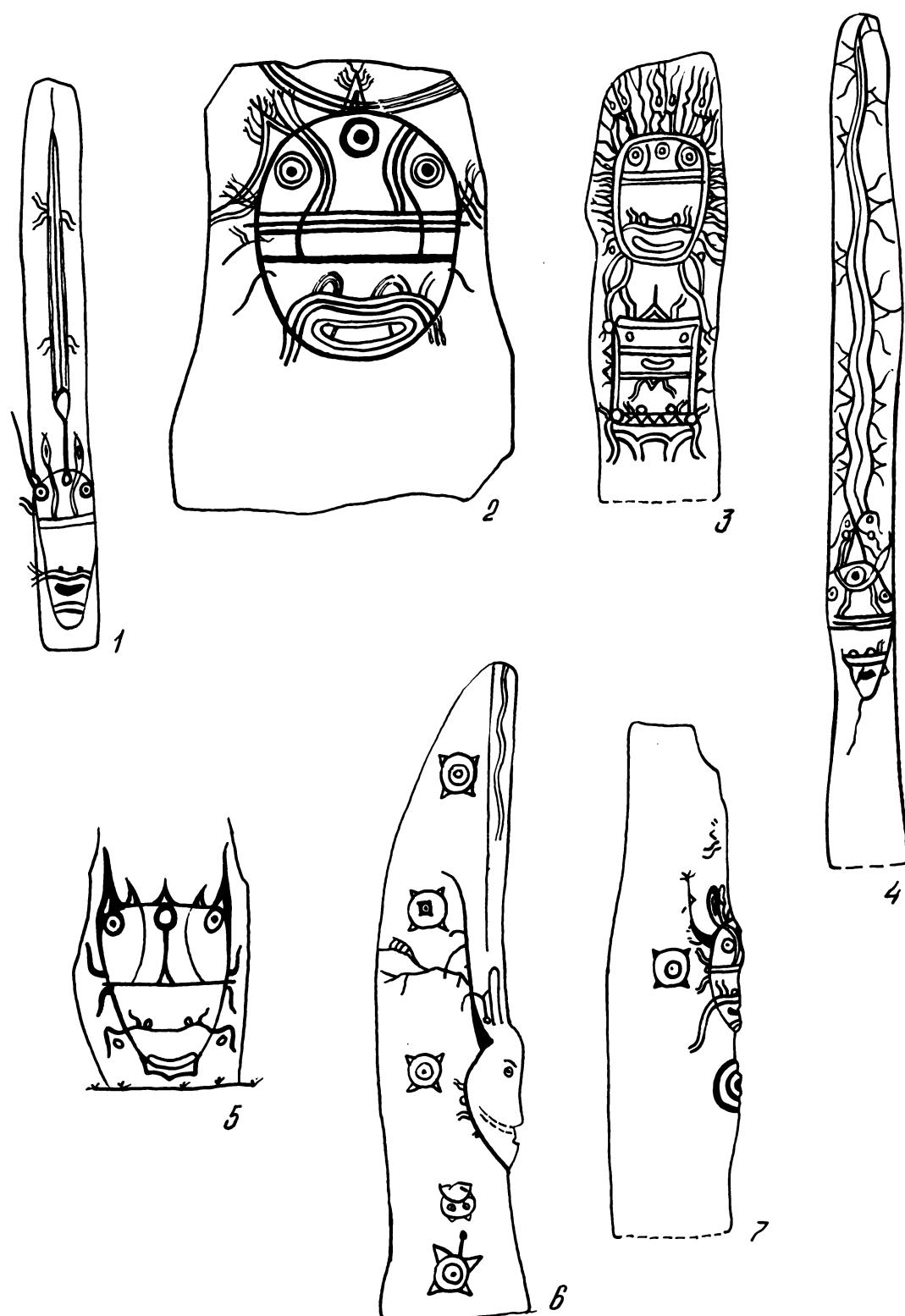


Figure 4. Pillars of Fertility from the Early Agriculturalists and Herders of North Asia (Okunevo).

on a flat slab from Kurgan 4⁵ of the Chernovaya cemetery on the Yenisey River, the so-called "deity with spear" (Fig. 3:5). A careful examination of this unique representation makes evident that it too is a deity of a vegetative cult. In its essence, the representation is very similar to known representations of Eneolithic agriculturalists in other parts of Eurasia. That which we perceive as the "head" or "crown" is a distinctive ideographic communication of a tripartite world, which was brilliantly deciphered by B. A. Rybakov (1981:194-198) from Tripolye symbols. The "crown" is nothing more than a representation of the "upper world" and its uncountable water resources. Here are depicted the characteristic double wavy lines of water. The upper part of this drawing resembles an enormous cup with water (streams and a triangular splash in the middle) while the convex parts under the cup are remarkably reminiscent of the breast of the Universal Mother. Below is placed the middle layer with the obligatory solar signs and three-stream stripe symbolizing earth. The heavenly moisture cuts the entire middle layer with three streams of rain, which end in small drops below, near the mouth. The lower layer ("lower earth") is shown as a figure with an open mouth, sucking in the falling moisture. A saturation of symbols occurs on the body, pictured by wavy lines, shoots, and streams. And the products of this cosmic system are thin, stalk-like arms which hold not a spear, as some investigators have thought (Vadetskaya et al. 1980:76), but stalks of grain, very much like growing sheaves enclosed by the thin leaves typically located near stalks.

In this way, the slab represents not an anthropomorphic being but a drawing of a particular structure of the world. A three-layered world is represented on many other slabs. Thus, on the stela from the cemetery at Chernovaya I, the upper sky is portrayed on top, in the form of a cup. Below are placed curved, falling streams of water, solar symbols of the middle layer, and the horizontal stripes of earth. And on the entire surface, placed above the line of earth, are shown young shoots (Fig. 4:2). The representations on the upper parts of other stelae show accessories with the same semantic character. They show heavenly moisture, falling streams, and numerous dots symbolizing moisture.

⁵kurgan In contemporary usage, especially in the Soviet Union, a large burial mound customarily covered by rocks, often with a stone enclosure. Derived from Old Turkic *quryan*: fortification, fortress (Aydarov 1971:362). (DBS)

One detail should also be mentioned. On the Okunevo masks there are side-growing shoots. Shoots in the upper half of the stelae have ends tending upward, while those on the lower half tend downward. Perhaps the latter are roots (Fig. 4:5).

In the Eneolithic monuments of Siberia, we see evidence of those world views which were characteristic of the most ancient agriculturalists and especially Indo-Europeans. The variations are not so much in the philosophical-logical system of concepts of the cosmos, hidden growth, and reproduction as they are in concrete images and their artistic execution. However, we see much in common here. For the most important forces of elements--upper world, rain symbols, grain, etc.--are corresponding stable signs (a tripartite world, solar symbols, rain, and growth).

In examining Okunevo stelae as a whole, we note two basic semantic types of representation: simplified and complex. Simplified figures are represented by anthropomorphic figures, masks with radiating heads, and bulls with horns. The more complex types present a cosmic picture and explain the mysteries of vegetative growth, natural cycles, and the regeneration of life.

The stelae were not connected with cemeteries in Okunevo culture. These were symbols of fertility. They comprised within themselves an artistic embodiment of the basic concepts of the most ancient herders and agriculturalists of South Siberia. They were the basic symbols of religious places. It is noteworthy that, at this time, cult places were associated not only with mountains but with fields and fertile valleys where indeed these symbols were situated. Possibly, there were separate solar cult sanctuaries, judging from anthropomorphic representations of the sun.

SYMBOLS OF A SOLAR DEITY AND FERTILITY IN THE EARLY IRON AGE

The early Iron Age of Northern Asia, about 700-300 B.C., is represented by three extensive culture-historical zones: (a) the southern part, the zone of societies of the Scytho-Siberian world, which were linked by a common economy, culture, and world view to the steppe world of Eastern Europe; (b) the forest zone; and (c) the Far East. Stable symbols of the solar cult, animals, and the vegetative powers of nature were established in each of these zones. They were expressed in the numerous metal products of so-called Scytho-Siberian art, in artistic manufactures of wood, bone, and leather, and in numerous petroglyphs in the Sayan-Altay ranges and Minusinsk basin

(Sher 1980:122-75, 232-86). Here we shall deal only with the southern part.

Let us first consider the "tree of life." The most realistic association of the goddess of fertility with the "tree of life" is known from a felt tent panel of Pazyryk kurgan 5 in the Gornyy Altay, attributed to the third-fourth centuries B.C. (Fig. 5:6). On the panel is represented a goddess seated majestically on a throne. She has long clothing decorated with streak marks. She has a large headdress (Gryaznov 1958: Fig. 56). In one hand, she triumphantly holds a large branch with shoots which end in five pairs of stylized figures. They are two flowers, blue and red, of cup-like forms, two yellow flowers of palmetto form, two triangular, red flowers, two violet flowers with three thickenings at the end, and two yellow ones resembling split rose leaves. Such a combination is not accidental. The pairs seem to represent male and female origins, while real plants are evidently pictured. The goddess' throne has legs resembling plants, while its back ends in an apparent root. The headdress, a rectangular cap, has serrations reminiscent of cultivated land. In this way, all the essential attributes of a fertility deity are present: the "tree of life" growing out of the deity's knees, as well as grain, roots, and a field in spring.

Another object dedicated to the tree cult is a pair of gold belt ornaments from the Siberian Collection of Peter I (Rudenko 1962: Pl. XXII, XXIV). This is seen by the investigator as an epic scene supposedly narrating the death of a hero (Fig. 5:7). But something else is represented in this scene. This is apparently a scene from a mythological narrative, the center of which is the tree. It is unusual, consisting of nine thick branches which end, not in leaves, but in hypertrophied buds. Beside it stand two saddled horses. Here, as in other cases we have examined, details are important. The lower branch of the tree is connected with one horse's muzzle. A man sitting under the tree holds the other horse's bridle. On the other side of the tree trunk sits a second man. On his head is a tiara which turns into a long, bent branch. A second similar branch seems to grow out of the man's neck. It unites and weaves together with the tree's branches. Evidently, this is an important detail. Near the men lies a third person on his side, dressed in a short jacket which reaches barely below the pelvis. It appears likely that the tree is growing out of the shoulders of this dead man. Here is the center of the entire composition. All the actors of this narrative scene are linked by the branches of the "tree of life." The tree emerges as a symbol of the regeneration of new life. The connection between it and the animals,

and all three human figures is therefore significant.

Several other objects from the Siberian Collection should probably be interpreted as the "tree of life." In this connection the plate depicting a tree in the center and fantastic animals on the periphery deserves attention (Fig. 5:9). Also, it should be noted that the rectangular tablets from the Ordos in Mongolia customarily enclose their subjects in frames of trees, branches, and leaves. Such plates have been published and exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Let us turn now to the most characteristic materials of Altay art of the end of the first millennium B.C. Symbols of the idea of regeneration were, evidently, animal horns or antlers. Truly unique in this regard is the sculptured deer head in a griffin's beak from Pazyryk kurgan 2 (Fig. 5:8). The griffin is swallowing the deer's head, which is carved of wood. The dying deer has enormous antlers, which are made of leather. They are hypertrophied, about seven times as large as the head. They bend back and forth rhythmically in two bands, and have nine similarly bent prongs ending in miniature griffin heads with beaks, eyes, and crests. The overall picture is of an ordinary branched antler, similar to those represented on bronze deer brooches of the Scythic epoch.⁶ However, the basic idea is expressed with utmost clarity. The antler bears in it the idea of regenerated life. One life is dying in the griffin's maw but the life-giving power contained in the antler gives many repetitions of new life, albeit in a different embodiment. Probably, this idea of repetition is contained in the rhythmically branched antlers on other Scythian bronze brooches showing deer.

During the Scythic period of Siberia, several solar symbols were used, depending upon semantic context. These included bronze and gilded solar disks, widely known from graves, deer representations in the "animal style," with added solar symbols, and, in the early period (eighth to sixth centuries B.C.), so-called "deer stones" with representations of animals in extended posture with luxuriant antlers and solar marks.

Of these symbols, the simplest in meaning were the bronze solar disks. More complex were the plates representing deer with legs

⁶Throughout these essays, the term "Scythian" is restricted to the historic peoples and cultures of South Russia. For the allied cultures extending across Eurasia, either "Scythic" or "Scytho-Siberian" has been used. (DBS)



Figure 5. Solar and Vegetative Symbols of the Scythic Epoch in Siberia.

folded beneath them and symmetrically developed antlers (Fig. 5). The basic idea was that color, radiance, and movement were accentuated by a selection of artistic means, such as gold on the deer's figure or antlers or the semicircular antler which could be accepted as a solar symbol (Martynov 1979:Pl. 40-45). On some bronze plates the representations have incised wings, while the idea of the sun is transmitted by circles on the animals' haunches (Fig. 5:1,2,3). These are the flying solar deer of the Scythic period in Siberia.

The artistic expression of symbols becomes significantly more complex in the Scythic period. This was a reflection of world view throughout that Eurasian steppe world of which South Siberia was a part. With the Hunnic advances from 200 B.C. on, the historical situation changed, as did the artistic forms, but two mythological ideas persisted: the sun as the source of all life, and the "tree of life," representing cyclicity in nature. They were parts of a very complex mythological system that included models of the world and cosmos which we are now beginning to understand (Rayevskiy 1985; Akishev 1984).

SOLAR SYMBOLS AND THE TREE OF LIFE IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM A.D.

At the beginning of our era, the historical situation in Northern Asia, especially South Siberia, changed. The Hunnic epoch began. In the second half of the first millennium, the culture of the Old Turkic period developed. Notwithstanding these considerable cultural changes, the symbols of the solar cult in connection with animals and the cult of the "tree of life," in connection with regenerating life, persisted.

Solar symbolism developed steadily during this time. There was only some change in the content and artistic formulation of solar symbols. A very interesting collection of solar plates comes from the Stepanovo hoard near Tomsk. These are round, bronze plates with loops for fastening on the reverse side. On their upper surfaces are represented concentric circles associated with depictions of bread grains, also arranged in a circle (Fig. 6:5-8). The same style of plate is known from Siberian cemeteries of the beginning of our era. Here, the idea of the sun is linked with those of regenerated life and fertility. These materials date to the first centuries B.C.-A.D. (Martynov 1979:Pl. 53). Later, bronze plates with concentric circles are known from the Tomsk cemetery, the Yelikayevskiy hoard on the Tom River, and the Ishim collection. Certain of the bronze plates from Tomsk and Ishim also have the

picture of a human face on their surfaces (Fig. 6:1-3). In the forest zone of Western Siberia, bronze representations of horses holding solar circles in their hooves are found (Fig. 6:4).

For the first millennium A.D., images of solar animals (deer, rams, horses) in the forms of circles, pendants, and amulets are characteristic. They are widely known in Southern Siberia, Eastern Europe and the whole of the Old Turkic world (Martynov 1979:Pl. 47).

Representations of the "tree of life" are also widely known in the first millennium A.D. and later in North Asia. Attention is drawn to the tree-like bronze castings from the Western Siberian forests, which relate to the so-called Kulay culture of the mid-first millennium. They became known only at the beginning of this century from finds at Kulayka Mountain in Tomsk Oblast (Myagkov 1929:51-86) and from objects of the already-named hoard discovered 50 mi north of Achinsk (Yermolayev 1914:Pl. VII). Later, they were discovered among the artifacts of the Krivosheyenskiy hoard (Urayev 1956:329-350), and from sites on the Vasyugan River, a branch of the Ob'.

Those artifacts from the Kulay and Krivosheyenskiy hoards in Tomsk Oblast are the most interesting. The discovery of these objects associated with heaps of burnt clay testifies that they were placed in ancient cult sites. It is possible that the objects were cast at those localities since metallurgical slags are present next to the Krivosheyenskiy hoard. How the cult place itself was constructed remains unknown. The artifacts found indicate that they were used in mystery rituals honoring fertility and the regeneration of forest life. The stylized figurines of animals, birds, and anthropomorphic beings speak to a religious function. They are united by a single manner of representation and a distinctive artistic style. Initially, they give the impression of a careless, even ugly, execution and of primitive metal castings. However, this is not so. The artistic manner was determined by their semantic content and purpose. These are tree-like representations of plants, animals, and people.

These artifacts may be divided into three basic groups.

(1) *Tree-like figurines* (Fig. 7:1-5). In a schematic, conventional way they communicate a tree trunk with branches capped with bird and animal heads. These representations are very heterogeneous in form and style, from realistic to utterly schematic. Evidently, they show the unity of plant and animal nature and its regeneration. The latter attribute was achieved by the repetition of the very same stylized symbols of

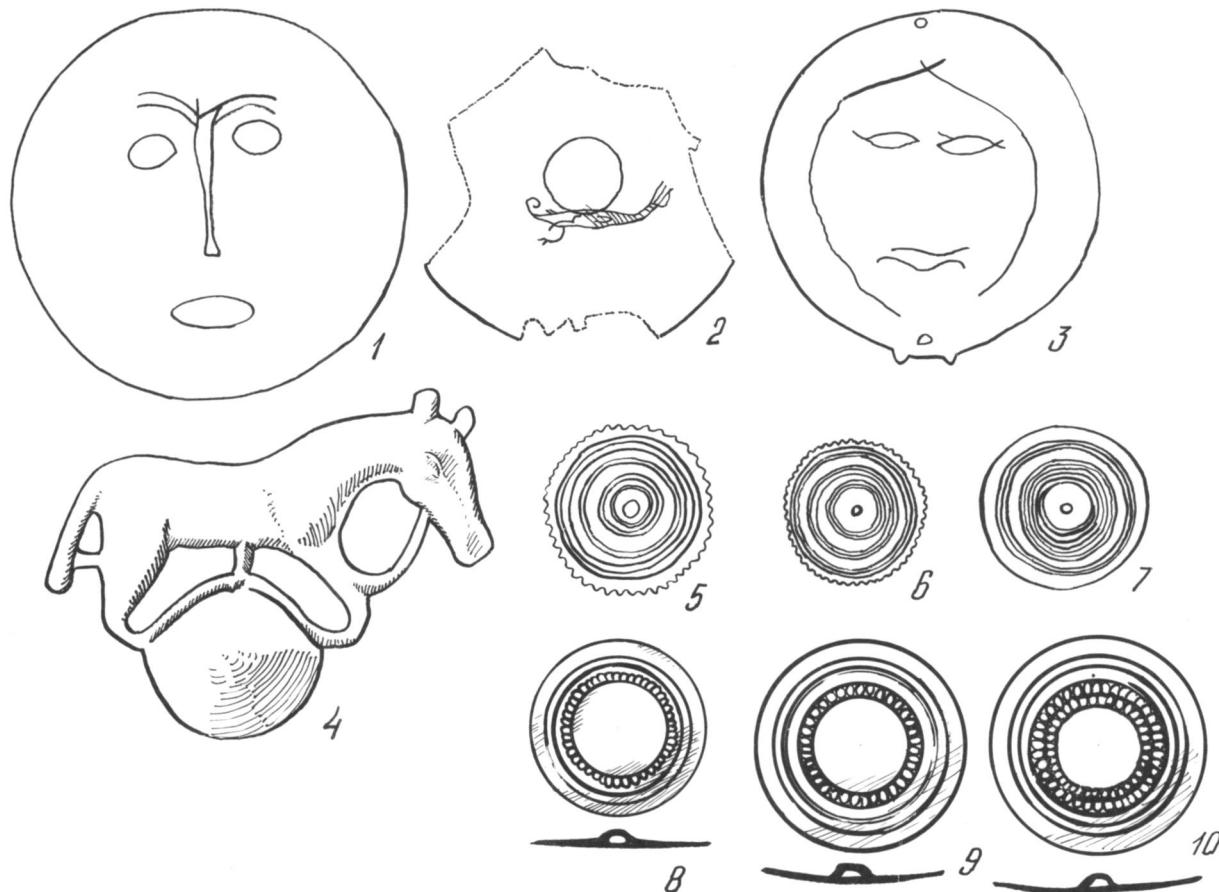


Figure 6. Solar Images of the Hunnic Period in Siberia.

birds, bird beaks, or animal heads as branches growing out of trunks.

(2) *Stylized representations of moose.* These are artifacts of a so-called flat, one-sided casting. They can also be seen as ugly monster castings, recalling moose with large misshapen heads and short legs (Fig. 7:9,10). They project the image of wood: antlers in the form of branches and legs shown as short, ugly shoots.

(3) *Anthropomorphic masks and idols* (Fig. 7:6,7,11). Their heads are clearly shown but their bodies are only indicated. The arms and legs are usually only suggested by protuberances. Paired and even tripled anthropomorphic representations are encountered. Repetition and multiplication signify the cycles and regeneration of life. These are some types of vegetative deities. In some cases woody branches emerge from the figures' heads. An anthropomorphic figure from the Krivosheyevskiy hoard shows two

massive antler-branches in the form of moose heads growing out of this being's head (Fig. 7:7). No less interesting is a mask found on the Shaytanka River in Tomsk Oblast. It represents a round head with poorly indicated facial features (Fig. 7:6). Above the head radiate five lengthened animal heads--possibly snakes with open jaws. An enormous beaked bird grows out of the head of a third idol from the Krivosheyevskiy hoard.

In summary, there appears to have been, in the Northern Asian forests during the first millennium A.D., a widely distributed cult of trees that was connected with the idea of regeneration in both vegetative and animal manifestations. The artistic images indicate that an anthropomorphic deity related to forests and animals had an important role in these religious manifestations.

We have traced through archaeological materials the way in which two very ancient concepts of the sun and natural cycles have

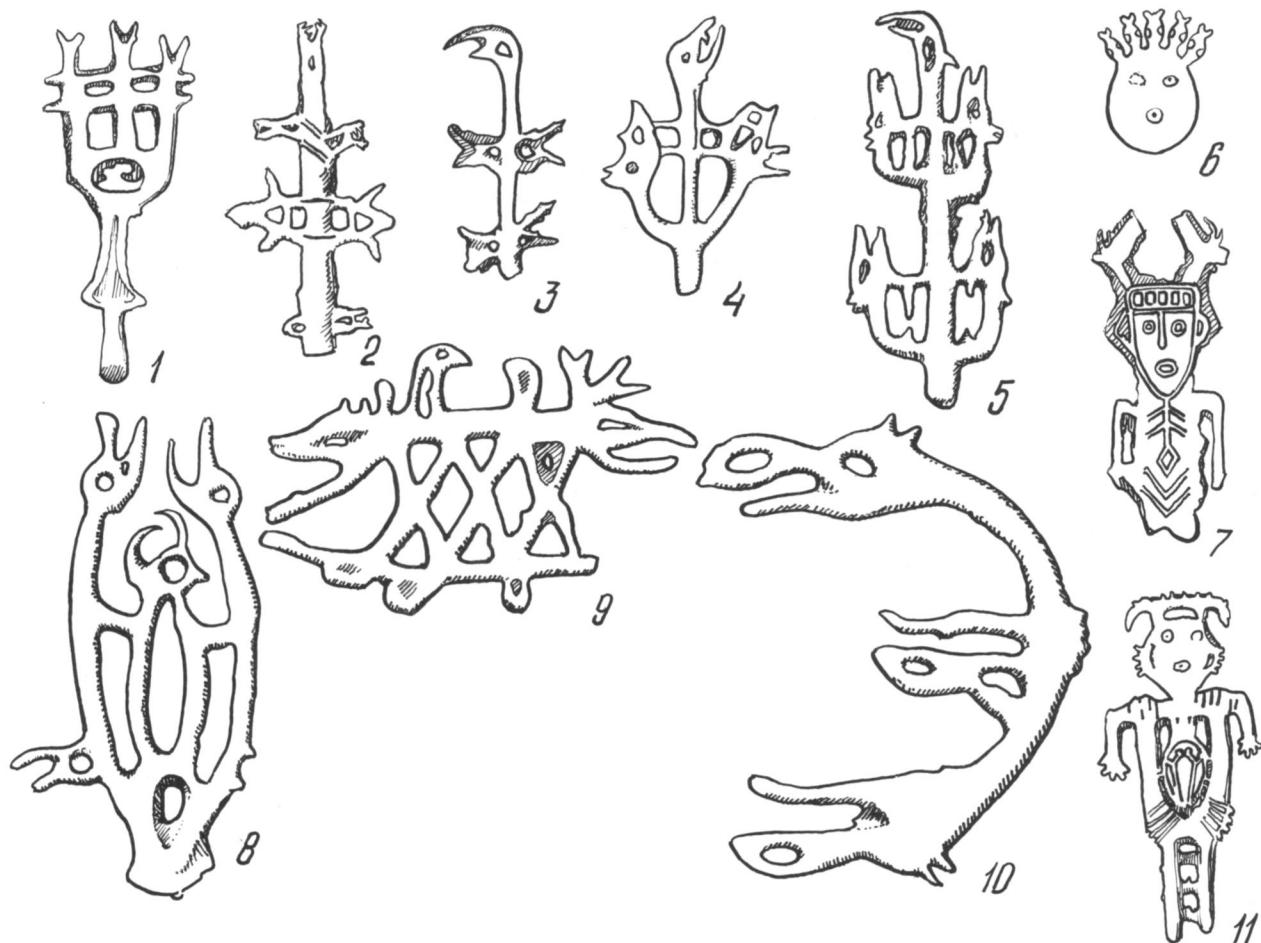


Figure 7. Tree-Like Symbols of the Kulay Forest Culture of the First Millennium A.D. in Siberia.

been expressed. However, these ideas persisted in later times among the Siberian peoples in the forms of ornaments, folk drawings, and incised or painted designs on cliffs. Interesting Khakas⁷ representations were discovered on isolated slabs in the Oglakhta Mountains of the Yenisey (Kyzlasov and Leontyev 1980:Pl. 31:1, 39). Of special interest is an anthropomorphic being with seven heads growing fan-like from his body. In the center of this composition is the large figure of a horse decorated with dotted circles, probably solar marks. On the solar

horse is seated a small, schematically represented rider. Another anthropomorphic figure is placed under the horse (Fig. 8:1). This drawing is dated; to the right of the solar horse is a signature: E. P. Chibizhev, 6 July 1907 (Kyzlasov and Leontyev 1980:Pl. 39).

Solar and vegetal symbolism is widespread in the traditional ornamentation of the native peoples of Siberia and the Far East (Ivanov 1963; Lukina 1979). The fullest image of a clan tree is preserved in the decorative art of the Amur Nanay (Fig. 8:5). Representatives of trees embroidered on robes are also known (Ivanov 1954:237-241, Figs. 107-111). Among other North Asiatic people, this subject is expressed in rhythmic ornamental motives carrying vegetative symbolism.

⁷Khaka An aggregate term for five northeast Turkic dialects (Sagai, Beltir, Kacha, Koibal, and Kyzyl) of the Minusinsk basin adopted with the formation of the Khakas Autonomous Oblast in 1930 (Deny et al. 1959:598-604). (DBS)

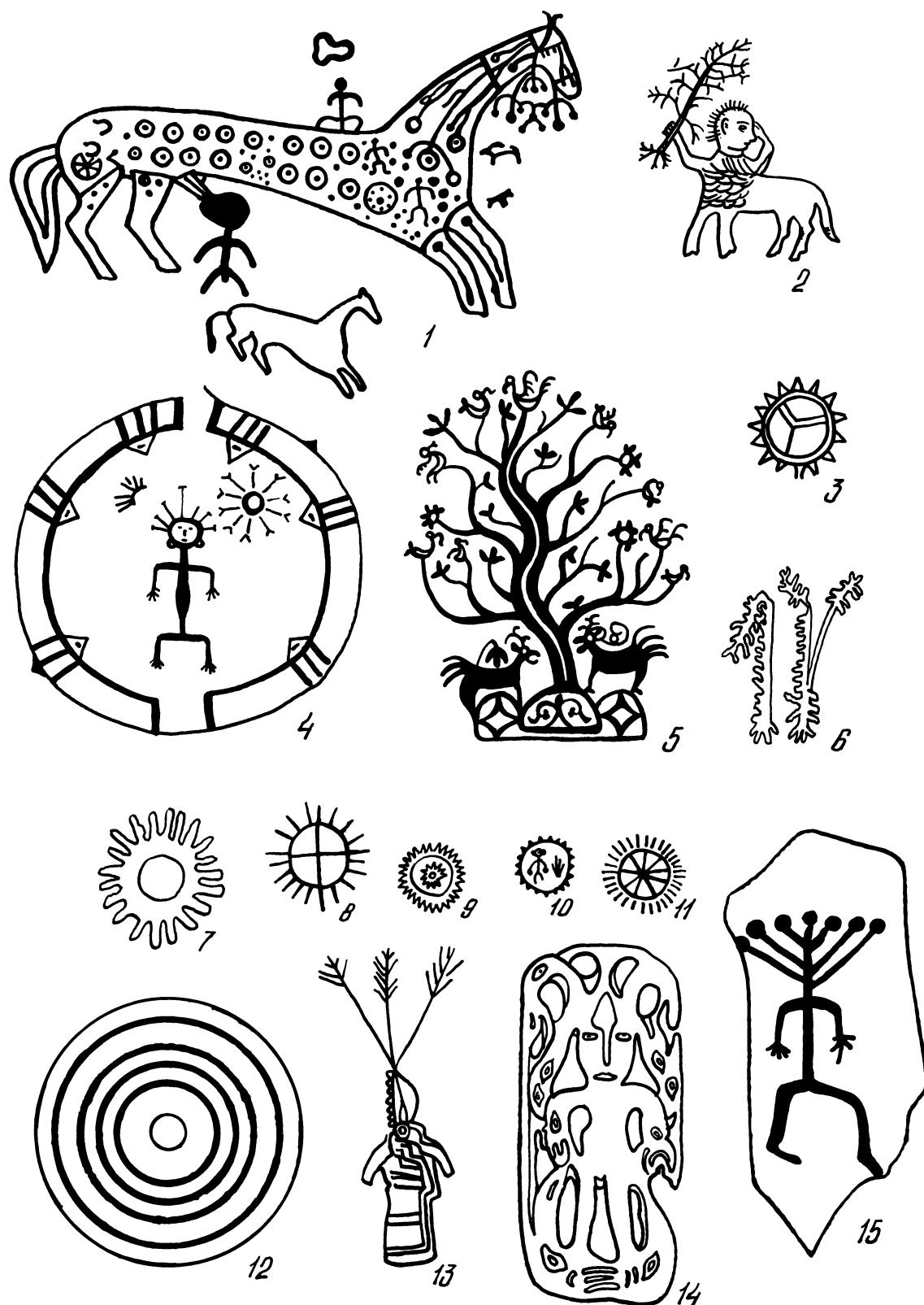


Figure 8. Symbols of the Sun and the "Tree of Life" Among Native Peoples of Siberia and the Far East.

**THE "TREE OF LIFE" AND SOLAR SYMBOLS
IN NORTH ASIATIC HISTORY AS PART
OF WORLDWIDE HUMAN IDEAS**

The emergence and diffusion of vegetative cults that focus on death and resurrection, and of solar cults, are traditionally associated with zones of early agriculture, such as the Near East, India, and the cultures of Meso- and South America. These include the well known cults of Tammuz, Osiris, Mithra, Adonis, Attis, and others. The nature deities were everywhere guardians of the secrets of alternating death and rebirth. They were linked, on the one hand, with the solar deity and with the secret underground world, the realm of the dead, on the other. In Near Eastern mythology, Tammuz was a special deity whose annual death was ceremonially mourned. The sources of such rites were very ancient. In the past, each deity represented some natural force. If the deity personified vegetation, he too had to die and become resurrected. This idea is contained in the legend of Enlil's descent into Hades, the myth of Enlil and Ninlil, and that of the departure of the god Ishtar to the "land without return." These legends are cited in James Frazer's fundamental work (Frezer 1980 [Russian edition]).

In reviewing ancient religion, special note should be taken of the cult of Attis, who was initially a tree spirit. As a tree spirit, Attis had power over hidden treasures of the earth. He was also identified with grain and given the epithet of "very fruitful." Cybele also can be seen as a goddess of fertility on whom grain harvests depended (Frezer 1980:364). These cults, as is known, were reflected in epics and artistic literature. They served as the bases for Greek and Roman pantheons.

It would be erroneous and crudely overstated to say that the Okunevo stelae and the Northern Asian artistic images and symbols in general were derived from the oldest vegetative cults of the Near East. However, the materials now known, beginning with the Neolithic, indicate that in this part of the world, rather distant from the ancient agricultural lands, there were widespread symbols of the sun and images of cycling nature. Evidently, ancient food-producing economies had a common world view, although mythological narratives and symbolic systems were of course different in different parts of the ancient world. In Siberia, these cults developed on a largely local basis. They were expressions of widespread philosophies and world views, developed partly from external influences but mostly independently. Their recognition has been late in coming because Siberian cultures have largely lacked a written record.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay has demonstrated that a number of ideas are expressed in Siberian native art. These include a solar deity and closely tied to this, the idolization of the natural cycle. These concepts are inherent to a large part of humanity, and are found among various societies under different states of socioeconomic development and under different geographical conditions. Evidently, the bases of these primary materialistic ideas are common to the human condition. Differences between cultures may be represented as different expressions of common cognitive structures. These were different strategies by which people could understand nature by constructing logically coherent systems. The common bases appear to be the tripartite division of the world, the general principles of cosmic structure, and the tendency to order world processes.

From the Eneolithic onward, the cults of the sun and vegetative powers persisted in Northern Asia in three basic expressions: vegetal, animal, and human. Solar signs (circles) on petroglyphs and images of "solar" deer represent deities among Neolithic hunters and in the Eneolithic. These subjects are linked to a persistent concept of a tripartite world, and to a primary materialistic cosmogeny. They are reflected in mythology, specifically in myths of a "sun-deer" among Northern Asian natives.

The cults of the sun and natural forces received a fundamental new development with the diffusion of food-producing economies into the southern steppes of Siberia. In Northern Asia, this manifestation coincided with the initial diffusion of metal. The same ideas about natural forces began, however, to be expressed differently by taiga hunters, agriculturalists, and steppe herders of the Okunevo culture.

In the Scythic epoch, several solar symbols occurred that transmitted different contextual meaning. Among these were bronze and gilded solar disks, as well as depictions of deer on plaques. The basic ideas of color, radiance, and movement were emphasized by a specific choice of artistic means: gold ornamentation, semicircular antlers with superimposed semicircles, strips of gold glaze on antlers, round incisions on haunches, and wing-shaped cuts on shoulder blades. These ideas were expressed even more forcefully on the deer stones of the Transbaykal and Mongolia. These portrayed deer with elongated muzzles and luxuriant antlers extending in flight to a circle, representing the sun. In the first millennium A.D., the sun was personified in South Siberia in the image of a horse. Images of "solar" stallions have also found their

expression in the epics of the Altay-Sayan Turks.

As a whole, the concepts of the ancient population of Northern Asia reflected peculiarities of hunting and herding economies and lifeways. If among the ancient agriculturalists of South Siberia there was a cult of the secret powers of grain growth (germination, sowing, and the "tree of life"), then among hunters and herders this idea was linked with the secrets of fertilization and the birth of new life.

In this way, five basic chronological or developmental steps in the solar cult and the cult of vegetative forces may be noted in Northern Asia: (1) The solar and vegetative symbols of Neolithic hunters, (2) the symbols of early agriculturalists and herders in Southern Siberia, (3) the solar and plant rejuvenation cults, and the complex mythological symbolics of the Scythic epoch, (4) the solar and vegetative symbols of the first millennium A.D., and (5) elements of these ancient cults in the recent ethnography of Siberian native peoples.

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